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PROFILE

Cult hero Freddy's back

Freddy Kreuger: riding the merry-go-round.

BOB THOMAS

ACTOR Robert Englund recalls some advice Mel Brooks dispensed when Mark Hammill fretted about being stereotyped forever as Luke Skywalker from the 'Star Wars' movies. The gospel according to Brooks: "Never get off the merry-go-round while it's still turning".

Englund says: "I remember Mark, drinking a beer and watching an old 'Mary Tyler Moore Show' with me up in Laurel Canyon. He was so worried until Mel Brooks gave him that advice at 20th Century Fox. It really made sense to me, watching Mark and seeing his angst. I said to Mark, 'What's your problem? You're starring in 'Star Wars'?"

"I've used that advice all through the Freddy craze, and it's really kept me focused. The merry-go-round's going to stop pretty soon. I'll get off nice and gently and go on to other things."

The 'Freddy craze' is having another go-round with 'Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child'. It's yet another encounter with Freddy Kreuger, that charmer with the prune face and the steel-bladed fingers.

For an actor who has performed Shakespeare and Ibsen, Englund retains a healthy attitude about the character who has dominated his career for the past five years.

"I do Freddy once a year," explained Englund. "People accuse me of doing it for the money now. But I've had a decent career, and I'm still doing a lot of other things. I'm even turning down jobs because of conflicts in schedule.

"I enjoy doing Freddy. I don't enjoy putting the makeup on anymore. It's a real (2½ hour) drag. Once it's on, it's wonderfully designed, porous so it can breathe. I love being able to kid around with the crew as Freddy on the set. I love that. It's the one time in my life on film that I can really be larger than life — I can exaggerate. It's the kind of acting that's generally reserved for the theatre."

Freddy's alter-ego Englund.

The 'Nightmare' series is the kind of bonanza of which small film companies, such as new Line Cinema, dream. The original film was the creature of the poor man's Alfred Hitchcock, Wes Craven, who created such throat-grabbing terror that the $US1.2 million ($A1.59 million) investment returned $US26 million ($A34.54 million) in tickets sold. The cost has risen with each sequel, but so has the gross: $US30 million ($A39.86 million) for number two, $US45 million ($A59.79 million) for number three, $US50 million ($A66.43 million) for number four.

Who attends the slice and dice teen-oriented movies? "I think the original audience were punk rockers and heavy metal kids," said Englund. "They discovered the movie on their own. There was no hype at the beginning because New Line didn't have any money to advertise."

"There was a certain subversiveness, a certain anarchy to Freddy, a slight attack on middle-class complacency. After all — 'Elm Street', what does that stand for? Picket fences and lawns.

"With the budgets increasing, we changed to more of a fantasy and a special effects film. The audience has grown with it. We've gotten the 'Poltergeist' audience. We've gotten the kid brother and sister of the heavy metal and punk kids. And their parents, too."

Without the Freddy makeup, Englund is a pleasant, even bland looking 40-year-old with a short beard and curly blond hair. He was a California boy who attended Northridge State University and the University of California before studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

After playing the classics in the east, Englund decided to give Hollywood a try, and he appeared in such films as 'Buster and Billie' (Jan-Michael Vincent), 'Stay Hungry' (Jeff Bridges, Sally Field) and 'Last of the Cowboys' (Henry Fonda). Television brought him recognition, especially the mini series 'V'. He was also obliged to do the subsequent 'V' Series.

"I was playing the most beatific, nerdy little guy — the good alien," the actor said. "I did the first 'Elm Street' to meet Wes Craven, whom I'd heard a lot about, and also for the challenge of doing a character in makeup. I figured I was going to be locked into the television for five years. I wanted to show the town that I could do something very, very different."

As a slight change of pace, Englund will appear this autumn in the title role of a production of 'Phantom of the Opera'.

"Not the musical. I have the worst monotone in the world," he added hastily. 'This is from the original novel'.

'Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child' opens soon at Hoyts cinemas.

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